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Methodological Approaches Used in the Works of Fatima Mernissi on Issues of Islam and Gender Equality

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to reveal the methodological approaches that deal with the issues of Islam and gender equality in the works of Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, which is discussed within the scope of Islamic feminist discourse. In this sense, the subjects of "veil" and "women's leadership", which have an important place in Mernissi's works, are discussed as examples. In this context, two distinct methodological approaches stand out. These are the contextualist approach and hadith criticism. Mernissi's use of both methodologies in her work puts her in a special and unique position among Islamic feminist researchers. As a matter of fact, Muslim thinkers working on Islam and gender equality mainly focus on the Qur'an. This causes the field of hadith to remain in the background. In addition, even if the hadiths are discussed, the number of researchers who benefit from the classical methodology is quite limited. In this case, Mernissi's interest in both the fields of the Qur'an and hadith and her use of a methodological approach such as the hadith criticism put forward by the classical ulama in order to refute the validity of the acceptance by the classical ulema that women cannot be a leader brings her to the fore.

Key Words: Contextualist Approach, Hadith Criticism, Veil, Women's Leadership

Fatima Mernissi'nin Eserlerinde İslâm ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliğine Dair Meselelerde Kullanılan Metodolojik Yaklaşımlar

Özet

Bu makalenin amacı İslâmî feminist diskur dahilinde ele alınan Faslı sosyolog Fatima Mernissi'nin çalışmalarında İslâm ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğine dair konuların hangi metodolojik yaklaşımlarla ele alındığını ortaya koymaktır. Bu anlamda, çalışmada Mernissi'nin eserlerinde önemli yeri olan "peçe" ve "kadının liderliği" konuları örneklem olarak ele alınmıştır. Bu bağlamda iki belirgin metodolojik yaklaşım öne çıkmaktadır. Bunlar contextualist approach (bağlamsalcı yaklaşım) ve (hadith criticism) hadis tenkididir. Mernissi'nin çalışmalarında her iki metodolojiyi kullanıyor olması onu İslâmî feminist araştırmacılar arasında özel ve biricik bir konuma götürmektedir. Nitekim İslâm ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği çalışan müslüman düşünürlerin ağırlıklı olarak Kur'an odaklı çalışıyor olmaları bir yandan hadis alanının geri planda kalmasına diğer yandan hadislerin konu edinilse dahi klasik metodolojiden faydalanan araştırmacı sayısının oldukça sınırlı olmasına neden olmaktadır. Bu durumda Mernissi hem Kur'an ve hadis alanlarının ikisi ile de ilgilenmesi hem de bunu yaparken klasik ulemanın ortaya koyduğu hadis tenkidi gibi bir metodolojik yaklaşımı yine klasik ulema tarafından kadının lider olamayacağı kabulünün geçerliliğini çürütmek amacıyla kullanması onu öne çıkarmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bağlamsalcı Yaklaşım, Hadis Tenkidi, Peçe , Kadının Liderliği

Introduction

In modern times, crucial developments have been made in the interpretation of Qur'anic verses relating specifically to women (Saeed, 2014, p.38). It can be argued that there are a growing number of Muslim women scholars, particularly from the 1970s onwards, dealing with specific issues relating to women in Islamic texts. This has led to what many observers see as a school of *Muslim feminist scholarship.* However, it would be wrong to think of Muslim feminist scholarship as a monolithic entity. Muslim women scholars come from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from those who were educated in traditional Muslim societies to others who have undertaken studies in Western universities. It can be argued that women scholars such as Amina Wadud, Esma Barlas and Fatima Mernissi have very different perceptions as to how Islamic scholarship should consider

the interpretation of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet in relation to women (Saeed, 2014, p.42).

This article will critically evaluate the work of Fatima Mernissi, particularly her work on the concepts of the 'veil' and the 'women leader'. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that Fatima Mernissi uses two very important methodologies to reach her conclusions. These are the contextualist approach and hadith criticism. In this regard, it can be argued that Mernissi is unique among Muslim feminist scholars.

The first part of the article outlines some of the key features of Fatima Mernissi's work. Secondly, there is a brief examination of the contextualist approach. Thirdly, her works is analysed regarding its two most significant aspects; the contextualist approach and the critical approach to hadiths. The final part of this essay will be the conclusion.

It can be said that some Muslim women scholars do not want to be labeled as feminist or Muslim feminist (Saeed, 2014, p.42). For example, Fatima Mernissi, who is perhaps the best known of the female scholars in the Arabic world, prefers to use an Arabic term, *nisa'i,* in reference to her work.

It can be said that the term *nisa'i* is sometimes translated as "feminist", but Mernissi defines it in a different way;

> Nisa'i for me is an adjective which designated any idea, programme, project or hope which supports a women's right to full-fledged participation and contribution in the remarking, changing and transforming of her society as well as for realization of her talents, needs, potentials, dreams and truths (Barbara, 1999 p. 103 cited in Saeed, 2014, p.43).

Furthermore, it can be argued that Fatima Mernissi could be defined as a progressive ijtihadis in contemporary Islam trends. Progressive ijtihadis examine the essential Islamic values of justice (*'adl*), goodness and beauty (*ihsan*) within their own communities and in the world at large. They look to engage both Islamic tradition and modernity in examining areas of social justice, human rights, gender justice and pluralism. Moreover, they believe that Muslims should participate in open discussion on these and other matters, such as freedom of speech, globalization and equality of people regardless of religion, gender, race, ethnicity or language (Saeed, 2007, pp.401-402).

It can be argued that some progressive ijtihadis use a contextualist approach in their interpretation of the Qur'an and hadiths. And it can be said that Fatima Mernissi uses the contextualist approach in examining the concept of the 'veil'. Contextualists believe that certain teachings of the Qur'an can be practiced differently depending on the particular time and place (Saeed, 2008, p.221). Fazlur Rahman is one of the most significant contributors to contextualist study. Rahman argued that the Qur'an is mainly a book of guidance and ethics, rather than a book of law (Saeed, 2008, p.224). Saeed (2006, pp.149-152) describes a general four-stage model which demonstrates some of the main features of a contextualist interpretation of the Qur'an. It can be argued that this model covers a number of Fazlur Rahman's ideas, which, in turn, have influenced the study of many recent contextualist scholars.

The first stage of the model is becoming familiar with the texts through reading and listening. The second stage involves analyzing the text in a way that is independent of its historical context and in a more contemporary context. It can be said that this involves an analysis of linguistic aspects and the literary context of the text and the way it relates to a specific chapter in the Qur'an or the Qur'an as a whole. The third stage is particularly significant to contextualist interpretation, and involves an analysis of the Qur'an's meaning to its first receivers. It starts with a contextual examination, which would include elements such as the culture, values and norms of the first Muslim community. This stage includes categorizing the nature of the message, and deciding whether it is ethical, legal or theological. The final stage involves relating the meaning of the Qur'an to the contemporary context in which it is to be implemented. It can be argued that this stage involves the contextual analysis of recent values and social, political and economic matters. This stage includes comparing the contemporary setting to the socio-historical context and highlighting the key similarities and differences. In this way it is possible to assess the particularity or universality of the message of the texts; and make an assessment on its relation to and potential implementation in the modern world (Saeed, 2008, pp. 226-27).

Contextualist Approach: In the Concept of the 'Veil'

It can be said that the contextual/historicist reading of the texts is one of the most crucial aspects of the contextualist approach. In this regard, it can be fairly argued that the contextualist approach is heavily influenced by Fazlur Rahman. Fazlur Rahman (1982, pp.6-7) stated that (1) one has to recognize the significance or point of the given text by looking at the historical condition or case to which it was the response; (2) one has to generalize those particular responses and articulate them as explanations of general moral-social aims that could be 'distilled' from particular statements in the view of the socio-historical background and; (3) the general has to be demonstrated in the current specific socio-historical context.

It can be said also that Fatima Mernissi uses this approach in her study related to the 'veil'. She repeatedly highlighted the importance of the historical background of the revelation in her study. It can be argued that Mernissi started by looking at the historical background of the revelations of verse 59 of sura *al-ahzab*;

'*Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful*' (Haleem, 2010, p.271).

In order to analysis the socio-historical context of the verse, she examined the *asbab al-nuzul* materials (reason for revelation). *Asbab al-nuzul* is accepted as one of the most important tools in interpreting the Qur'an by traditional Muslim scholars and is a subject in the *Ulum al-Qur'an* (Sciences of the Qur'an). For instance, Shayk al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah said: "The knowledge of *asbab al-nuzul* aids in understanding the verse, for knowledge of its cause of revelation produces knowledge of its application." Wahidi, one of the most important scholars in Quranic studies, said: "It is impossible to properly interpret a verse without reflecting over its *sabab al-nuzul*" (Qadhi, 1999, pp.119-20). Mernissi (1982, p.93) highlighted the importance of *asbab al-nuzul* in her work by using al- Suyuti's views about *asbab* materials.

Fatima Mernissi (1982, p.180-81) examined the reason for revelation of the verse related to the veil. Briefly, Islam at this time was being tested militarily and challenged by the Medinese peoples,

and women slaves were being used to guard aristocratic women. In the streets women, regardless of their status, were being harassed by men who subjected them to *ta'arrud,* which means "taking up a position along a women's path to urge her to fornicate". Faced with this situation, the problem of the Prophet was no longer freeing women from the trials of pre-Islamic violence but establishing the security of his wives and the wives of other Muslims in a city that was violent and out of control. In order to find out the roots of this problem, Prophet sent out his people to find out why women were being subjected to this behaviour. The men they talked to claimed that they only made *ta'arrud* with women they believed to be slaves. It can be argued that they were making excuses for themselves by asserting confusion about whether the women they approached were free or slave. According to Mernissi, this occasion was the reason for revelation of the verse 59 of sura 33: Allah revealed this verse and He advised the wives of the Prophet to make them recognised as such by wearing their *jilbab.*

Fatima Mernissi (1982, p.184) states that it was not Prophet but 'Umar who wanted that the *hijab* be instituted for women. 'Umar said to Prophet: "Messenger of God, you receive all kinds of people at your house, moral as well as evil. Why do you not order the *hijab* for the Mothers of the Believers?" Mernissi argued that the *hijab* illustrated the exact opposite of what Prophet had wished to bring about. It was the incarnation of the vacancy of internal check; it was the veiling of the sovereignty desire, which is the resource of good order and judgment in a community. It can be said that the solution of 'Umar, in forcing the *hijab* to keep women rather than change behaviors and compelling "those in whose heart is a disease" to attitude differently, was going to reduce importance of Islam as a body of thought on the individual and her/his role in society (Mernissi, 1982, p.188).

According to Mernissi, it can be argued that the *hijab* and veil have specific reasons for their revelation. In the time of Prophet, women faced serious security problems on the streets and Allah advised them to wear jilbab and cover themselves in order to protect themseleves. According to Mernissi, this verse applies only to this situation. In modern times there are not these kinds of problem and therefore women do not have to use veil or *jilbab*. Fatima Mernissi states:

> For women security would never return to the city. No more than dreams, can a journey back in time change the fact that the women of Medina would be forever frozen in its violent posture (Mernissi, 1982, p.191).

It can be argued that Mernissi used the contextualist approach in terms of historicist/contextual reading of the texts in her interpretation of the veil verses. Moreover, her analysis is based on *asbab al-nuzul* materials. In this sense, it can be fairly argued that her interpretation is considerably reliant on the hadiths, due to the fact that the *asbab* materials came from the huge resources of the hadiths (Qadhi, 1999, p. 109). Furthermore, it can be argued that, in contrast to traditional Muslim scholars, she is keen to restrict the interpretation of verses according to their reasons for revelation.

A Critical Approach to Hadiths: In the Concept of the 'Women Leader'

In the tradition of Islam, hadiths are accepted as the most reliable resources after the Qur'an for Muslims, most especially *al-Sahih al-Bukhari,* the most famous and credible source among the hadiths collections. However, in the modern times, there have been different views about the correct treatment of hadiths. For instance, Fazlur Rahman (1962, p.6, 12) states that many of the details of the Sunna were invented, and that the concept of the Sunna was unreliable. The Sunna of the Muhammad was not analyzed case law, but rather an umbrella grouping of behavior norms and an interpretative process by which Muslims could apply their laws to changing situations. Moreover Rahman (1962, p.40) argued that hadiths need to be critically re-examined in order to decipher if they were definitely part of the authentic Sunna 'whose very life blood was free and progressive interpretation'. It can be argued that Mernissi shared a similar view of the hadiths. Mernissi (1987, p.76) states that even the authentic hadiths have to be critically examined with a magnifying glass.

In her work 'Women and Islam' Fatima Mernissi states that her intention is to 'disinter' the original views of Islam from the centuries of carelessness that have controlled and obscured it (1987, p.77). Mernissi's heroine is the Prophet's wife Aisha who criticism of the hadiths narrators from the Prophet. Mernissi believes Aisha epitomizes an important aspect of Islam and also is an important voice on the initial messages of the religion regarding female empowerment. Mernissi argued that Muslim scholarship, with the exclusion of a minority of hadiths critics, has served as a tool of a social and political elite, indulging the aspirations of male politicians to shape the sacred (Brown, 2009, p.249).

It can be said that Mernissi deals with specific hadiths in her study. The first one is about the concept of 'women leader': 'Those who entrust power [*mulk*] to a woman will never know prosperity'. The second hadith, she examines in details, is 'The Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and women interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*.' Mernissi begins her study by looking at the historical background of these hadiths and after that she critically examines the narrators of these two hadiths, Abu Bakra and Abu Hurayra. Brown states that (2009 p.249) Mernissi effectively engages in a form of historical psychoanalysis, and she uses information from books of transmitter criticism to argue that Abu Hurayra concealed a deep personal resentment towards women and that Abu Bakra produced his hadith to protect his status with the caliph 'Ali after he had defeated Aisha at the Battle of the Camel. In her critical appraisal of the reliability of narrators Abu Bakra and Abu Hurayra, Mernissi (1987, p.60) stated that, according to Malik, some people cannot properly transmit a hadith. For example those who may incite *bid'a* [innovation] or are a liar. She argued that Abu Bakra cannot be a hadiths' transmitter because he was once flogged for untruthfully accusing al-Mughira ibn Shu'ba of committing adultery in the time of second caliph 'Umar. In the case of Abu Hurayra, Mernissi states that when people invoked the hadith about the three causes of interruption of prayer in front of Aisha, she responded: "You compare us now to assess and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayer while I was there, lying on the bed between him. And the *qibla* and in order not to disturb him, I did not move" (Mernissi, 1998, p.120).

It can be argued that, like Fazlur Rahman, Fatima Mernissi believed that even authentic hadiths must be re-examined and analysed. She argued that the highly popular hadith about the concept of 'women leader' is not reliable because Abu Bakra produced this hadith for his personal benefit during the Battle of Camel. Moreover, the narrator of this hadith Abu Bakra was also not reliable due to the fact that he punished by 'Umar because of the above mentioned false testimony. She critically analyzed some other hadiths relating to women and showed their falsehoods. It can be clearly seen that her work is based on the socio-historical background of the issues. Furthermore, she claims that the misogynistic hadith about the 'women leader' is presented to us today as sacred and unquestionable truth. Even though it was regarded as authentic by *al-Bukhari* and others, the hadith was contested by and problematic for many (Mernissi, 1998, p.120). It can be worthy of note that Jonathan A.C. Brown (2009, p.265) states that, before Fatima Mernissi, no classical

Muslim scholar had used historical reports about Abu Bakra and Abu Hurayra in order to claim a misogynist conspiracy at the origin of Islamic law.

Conclusion

It can be argued that Fatima Mernissi can be defined as a progressive ijtihadis and also as a Muslim feminist scholar. Moreover, she can be accepted as a contextualist in terms of her interpretation of the Qur'an. In her work related to the 'veil', she used historicist/contextual readings of the text, which are the key element of the contextualist approach. It can be clearly seen that her study is based on the analysis of the *asbab al-nuzul* materials in order to understand the socio-historical background of the verses in terms of the 'veil'. Stowasser (1995, p.7) points out that Mernissi reads the Qur'an as a seventh-century historical text and in her study the Qur'anic verses are related to the historical events surrounding their "occasions for revelation". Furthermore modernist would agree with Mernissi's claim that veiling, segregation and other Qur'anic social rules were decreed specifically for the Medinese peoples and, in a modern society, they are open for re-interpretation.

In the concept of the hadith, Mernissi argued that even authentic hadiths should be re-examined and analysed in order to test their reliability. Mernissi criticised the widely accepted hadith regarding the 'women leader'. She concluded that this hadith is not reliable and its narrator cannot be accepted as a transmitter. In this point, it can be fairly argued that there is a paradox in Mernissi's works. On the one hand, she interprets the Qur'an verses using asbab al-nuzul but she does so without any questioning of the reliability of the asbab al-nuzul. However she criticises some of the hadith as false. It could therefore be argued that, according to Mernissi's criticisms of hadiths, the asbab al-nuzul materials must also be re-examined because they come from hadiths collections.

Finally, it can be argued that Fatima Mernissi is unique among Muslim feminist scholars because she uses both hermeneutics and the hadiths in order to deal with women issues in the Islam. By contrast, Amina Wadud's work is based on the hermeneutics and she does not use any hadiths.

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